Public library in the Arab sector : mapping organization and future challenges / Shereen Massarwey

Abstract

Living in the information era in which there is unlimited access to information, the dimensions and space are losing importance, and books are digitally purchased and borrowed, public libraries' services are becoming obsolescent and public libraries will in time probably disappear. Surveys, however, indicate that public libraries are still important to the public and budgets are still proposed to renovation and expansion of existing libraries, and for building new big ones.

The public libraries these days do not only offer traditional library services and serve as reference and research centers, they also offer a variety of social activities for children and adults. The perception of the library as a social and educational center is reflected in the new vision of the public libraries in Israel, which goes with what is suggested by the Israeli center of libraries. In parallel with these activities, the traditional functions of libraries such as book borrowing and reading encouragement are still an important part of the activities offered by libraries in the Western world. Research also confirms that in addition to the important role the public library plays in finding quality information that is necessary for everyday life as well as the professional life of library users, it works on fulfilling the cultural life of the community through various activities such as author talks and lectures, an hour with a book and more.

Many studies have been conducted on the Arab society in Israel, which has undergone a variety of changes in many areas, such as: Family, and economical, educational and socio-cultural areas. Despite the cultural and educational importance of the public libraries, their being one of the public bodies suitable for social and cultural community gathering, very little information can be found about them. Therefore, this study came to fill part of the theoretical and empirical background about public libraries in Arab society in Israel.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the status of public libraries in Arab society in Israel and to obtain a general picture of what is done among the public libraries, both in the practical and the consciousness levels. On the practical level, we wanted to get data on: The activities and services provided, the library collection, their relationships with the community and other school libraries in the city, demographic variables and the qualifications of librarians and the library managers, the characterization of the library users, and the financial resources available to library managers. On the consciousness level, library managers' perceptions were examined, in relation to the role of the library and its position, and the difficulties they face. The research method chosen is the qualitative-phenomenological method, one type of qualitative research. The data in the study were collected through semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of 40 (8 male and 32

Library of Information Science
Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel
Email: Ruthi.Tshop@biu.ac.il

הספריה למדעי המידע
אוניברסיטת בר-אילן, רמת גן 5290002
טלי. Tel. 972-3-5318163

www.is.biu.ac.il/library

female whose age ranged from 32- 62) directors of Arab public libraries from all over the country participated in the study. All of them are holders of licensed librarianship and librarian training certificates, and their experience in library management ranged from 3.5-40 years.

The findings of the study show that most libraries suffer from a shortage of the appropriate public library structure or manpower, with approximately 37.5% of the libraries participating in the study being managed and functioned by the director alone. In addition, the results of the study showed that the appointment of staff in libraries was only under authority of the heads of councils/ municipalities. Most appointments are considered political. In other words, the heads of councils hire their relatives or supporters and do not consider the qualifications or how suitable that person is for library work. In addition, most of the library collections are printed books, and most of the library users are children and elementary school students, so children's stories and beautiful literature are in demand. Library directors stated that they encourage the users to request books, but avoid purchasing materials that are not acceptable to them or that may be unacceptable to community members. In addition, most libraries are connected to the Internet, but the directors see technology as a tool rather than a goal in itself. The findings of the study show that the traditional concept of the library is around the book and everything related to its access to serve the public is the main aim of public library directors in Arab society. Moreover, they assert the library's innovative concept, its being an information, leisure and community center that delivers services to the public. The directors' perception of the role of the library is a combination between the traditional and the social-community perception. The directors are aware of changes taking place in their work environment and see themselves as leaders of change, but the implementation of the changes is related to the socio-economic environment that operates the library.

Regarding the Arab library as a leisure center, the stipulation of the interior culture is particularly poor for young people, out of 40 libraries; only three libraries deliver leisure activities that do not relate to literary context to the public. In addition, there are unstable relationships with the heads of authorities; half of them are unaware of the importance of the library and its function in the society. As a result, the directors are struggling to meet the basic requirements for maintaining the library and continuing its services. Furthermore, managers are aware of the world's technological changes and are responsive to public requests, and most of them make efforts to implement every vital innovation that serves the public, but the implementation of the changes is linked to the socio-economic environment in which the library operates. The conclusions that emerged from this study; changing awareness among local authority decision makers about the library's importance for the community is a driving force for the library's growth and development. The success of the library in Arab society depends on the management style and the way it operates, the managers' perception of the library's role in the community, and the necessity for the combination of both the traditional and socio-community perception. Accordingly, we recommend the following: 1. Further research is needed on library users' perception and

the role of the library; 2. Changing the mayors' and local authority decision makers' attitudes towards the libraries to expand their awareness of the importance of the library; 3. The Ministry of Culture and Sport should continue to foster the libraries and improve the status and salaries of librarians; 4. Inspectors should organize gathering days for all the directors in all districts, 5. The last recommendation is for library directors. They have to increase public awareness about the library by marketing its services and by conducting diverse activities for all ages.

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